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The Sanctuary Disturbed: Jessica Webster's 'Wisteria'

Jessica Webster

By Amie Soudien

May 11, 2017

Goodman Gallery, Cape Town

22.04 – 24.05.2017

In Betty Friedan's seminal work *The Feminine Mystique*, American housewives are found to be overwhelmingly unhappy. Their lot is now a well-worn cliché of the American dream – tending to spacious suburban homes, with 2-3 children, a golden retriever and husbands who work in the city. Originally published in 1964, the source of their collective unhappiness is initially seen as a conundrum: how can a woman be unhappy when she has everything society admires?



Jessica Webster *Untitled: Amelia (I & II)* – diptych, 2017. Wax and oil on canvas

Friedan's book has since been criticised many times over. Detailing the struggles of prosperous, white, educated American women could not possibly account for an entire gender's experience, let alone the experience of the average American woman. Like the white picket fence in *The Feminine Mystique*, painter Jessica Webster alludes to an equally constructed ideal – the middle-class suburban garden. In 'Wisteria,' the second solo exhibition by Webster at Goodman, the artist offers viewers a damaged, even sinister perspective of the South African suburban idyll.

In *Untitled: Amelia II* (2017) the blue clam splash pool – so frequently seen worn and used to oblivion, half filled with sand – sits in the backyard, next to the large scale swimming pool with a protective net and a Creepy Krauly. The painting's surface is marred by grey streaks, and a strange white, spore-like texture overtakes the lawn. The infected garden recurs within *Wisteria* – itself a non-indigenous plant favoured in suburban South African gardens – with spotted, rash-like surfaces appearing in *Untitled:*

Alexandra (2017), and *Untitled: Layla* (2017). Webster's gardens are not peaceful havens, but are at the mercy of her defacement.

The garden is an apt analogy for the colonised space, and its correlations are not merely poetic. In a simplified sense, the tended garden differentiates from the open wilderness: it indicates a space that is owned, and cultivated. Suburban gardens function as symbols of control, and a place of safety away from the city, which is seemingly scary and unpredictable. Webster's backyards are never allowed to exist freely but remain obscured, interrupted by the painterly surface. The artist works over photographs in many of her paintings, and the surfaces of each medium become increasingly ambiguous to discern.

Jessica Webster *Untitled: Alexandra – diptych*,
2017. Wax and oil on canvas

Webster herself draws a direct correlation between the sanctity of the garden and the 'white woman.' The evocation of the 'white woman' as, in the words of Webster, 'delicate victim and threatening provocateur' functions as a point of judgement and self-critique. A cartesian plane covers the surface of *Untitled: Chloe* (2017). The figure depicted within it, falls just below the x-axis, bent over with her hands in her lap. Appearing like something to both measure, and take aim, *Chloe's* dark red cross makes its occupant vulnerable as the target of potential violence.

Perhaps that is the true conundrum of 'Wisteria' – the presence of a violence that appears to both lurk on the outskirts of private space, and emanate from within. In these self-made oases, the threat arises from the possibility of an intruder who may inflict physical violence, or the realisation that the foundations of this home are built on a fragile, manufactured sense of security, predicated on the negation of the 'other.' Such existential turmoil is illustrated by *Untitled: Sophie*. Its seven panels depict a dark, sticky mass rapidly encroaching on an immaculate lawn, with paving and blue pool sticking through.

Webster's use of space is clever and effective. *Untitled: Isla* recalls *Christina's World* (1948), by Andrew Wyeth. Christina was based on a young woman Wyeth knew, who was said to have suffered from polio. The disease left her legs paralysed, and in *Christina's World*, the young woman sits with her legs tucked beneath her, as the rural landscape stretches beyond the eye's comprehension. Webster offers *Isla* no such horizon. The picture plane is cramped around the figure, stifling any possible movement. As mentioned in her biography provided by Goodman, Webster herself was paralysed from the waist down after surviving a violent incident in 2006. In the exhibition text she is quoted as saying: 'As a "disabled" woman I am thrust outside the garden gate. Sitting quietly, I peer through the foliage into that fluorescent place...'

Jessica Webster *Untitled: Isla*, 2017.
Wax and oil on canvas

Such suburban ideals, much like the colonial project itself, are limited in every sense as they fail to acknowledge the possibility of other ways of being. And, despite its organic composition, the idyllic garden enclosed behind the gate is a static place, whose limitations can't or won't accommodate everyone. The paintings themselves reveal this wrestling clearly, resulting in an exhibition that searches inward without resorting to the appropriation of other stories or bodies. Webster's *Wisteria* is not a wistful meander, but rather, a frank examination of not only an identity, but a lifestyle. The artist sinks into a world of leisure swimming and plastic flamingos – a contrived version of nature, desperate for sanctuary.

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